Opening Statement
Representative James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Hearing on "Asia in Transition: Opportunities and Challenges for the U.S."
March 8, 2005

On behalf of the Subcommittee, I would like to extend a warm welcome to Ambassador Christopher Hill, the Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs at the Department of State. We appreciate your appearance before us today, as well as your public service.

The purpose of today's hearing is to review, with broad brush strokes perhaps, the fundamentals of United States policy toward the peoples and countries that comprise the vast reaches of East Asia and the Pacific. There can be no more sweeping canvas on which to set forth the contours of an American grand strategy for the 21st century; nor is there any diplomatic landscape so fraught with opportunity and peril.

In the broadest measure, the shifting distribution of power in Asia, symbolized by the rise of China, will likely present the largest geopolitical challenge facing the United States in coming decades. It is in this sobering context that the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st Century will be between China and the United States. If that relationship is ill-managed, the likelihood of conflict and economic trauma will be great. But if the relationship is managed well, the benefits in terms of economic prosperity and world peace will be commensurate. We look forward to a robust discussion with you of U.S. policy toward China, in all its extraordinary complexity.

Beyond Sino-American relations, the Subcommittee is interested in reviewing a number of other themes with great import for American interests: (1) recent developments and near-term trends in cross-Strait relations; (2) the importance of America's bilateral alliances in East Asia and how Washington is managing those relationships, particularly with respect to Tokyo and Seoul; (3) the implications for American interests of growing political rivalries in Northeast Asia; (4) how to more productively engage with ASEAN; and (5) America's posture toward the multitude of regional organizations suddenly appearing in East Asia, some of which include other major powers but exclude the United States.

But there is one issue I would like to dwell on for a moment this afternoon, and that relates to North Korea.

On September 19, 2005, China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States signed a Joint Statement of principles under which North Korea "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." In contrast to the hopes surrounding that pledge, the intervening six months have brought no substantive progress toward that end, and the Six Party process is beginning to appear moribund.

This circumstance is particularly regrettable because time is on no one's side. Every day of the status quo is another day for the North Korean regime to produce additional fissile material, and another day that the people of North Korea fall further behind the remarkable economic and social march of the rest of Asia. At the same time that the malfeasance of the North Korean government has brought us to this impasse, it remains in the interest of the United States to initiate additional dialogue, even if prospects for its success are uncertain.

Alternatively, to continue to maintain a reactive approach – such as placing unrealistic conditions on high-level contacts and other forms of meaningful engagement with the DPRK – cedes too much control to hard-liners in a regime that does not yet feel sufficient pressure or incentive to denuclearize.

We must continually test the intent of North Korea and not miss any opportunity for progress, however improbable. We are also obligated to consistently demonstrate to the other parties in the region that the intransigence impeding progress is not ours. Both of these priorities presuppose dialogue.

Because we control what we say, we ought not fear additional discussions or supplementary avenues of discussion. Conversation is never concession if one is speaking the truth, advancing the national interest.

At all levels of human interaction, including the international strategic level, there exists a significant psychological dimension: Between nations, as between people, the stronger party has greater strategic confidence and thus capacity to take the first conciliatory steps when intransigent differences arise. Given the enormity of the stakes at issue, it behooves the United States to take advantage of the greater flexibility we possess to creatively explore possibilities for resolving the challenges posed by North Korea.

One has the sense that due to understandable frustrations relative to past North Korean actions, including cheating on international commitments, the White House has given exceedingly constrained options to our negotiators. But clear-headedness about the nature of the North Korean regime should not cloud the mind about devising techniques and processes to overcome differences.

We have many assets, not the least of which is our professional diplomatic corps. American professionalism is exemplified by Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, who has developed a constructive relationship with all of the parties to the Six Party Talks, including North Korea. The case for sending him to Pyongyang to test the boundaries – and push the implementation – of the Joint Statement is compelling.

In particular, we should not be hesitant to begin considering the utility of "negotiat[ing] a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum," as envisioned by the Joint Statement and the recent U.S.-ROK strategic dialogue. Taking the initiative to formally end the Korean War would underscore our peaceful intent in an unparalleled fashion, and remind the Korean people that the United States singularly and unequivocally supports the peaceful reunification of the Peninsula. There may be sequencing concerns but forging ahead on this aspect of the statement of principles may increase the willingness of the other parties to exert greater pressure to enforce its critical core – the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula – and provide North Korea greater psychological as well as strategic comfort to accede to concerns of the outside world.

While we speak directly to the North Korean delegation in Beijing at the Six Party Talks and have certain contacts with the North Korean ambassador to the United Nations, there is clearly a problem of communication between our two governments. Accordingly, it is time, perhaps with appropriate quid pro quos, that we explore the feasibility of establishing liaison offices in our two capitals.

For the U.S. to continue to stand pat is to transfer initiative to others, indebting us to the diplomacy of countries that may have different interests, or simply ensconcing the status quo.

It's time for the United States to lead.

***